# GOOD WRITING: THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF FICTION

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> *'Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill*
> *Appear in writing or in judging ill;*
> *But of the two less dangerous is the offense*
> *To tire our patience than mislead our sense.*
>
> Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*

Why did *The Hand that Signed the Paper* win three major prizes and receive favourable reviews? What does such praise for a poorly written, allegedly plagiarised and morally obnoxious book say about Australian literary culture? Was there a conspiracy of influence behind the defensive pronouncements of the book's supporters? Those were some of the questions I was thinking about when I submitted the abstract for this paper. Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* offered itself for comparison because, unlike *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, it struck me as good writing; its themes were comparably controversial and ambitious, and yet it had received less acclaim.

The intervening months have provided few answers to my questions, despite the publication of four books on *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. There have been no admissions of conspiracy, the plagiarism expert has remained nameless, most of the critical positions have merely hardened, and many people have tired of the topic. I have been introduced to a more sophisticated view of literary prizes: that they are part of the circus rather than something to be taken seriously. Yet the circus performs in the world; prizes and good reviews sell books and make them more likely to be studied in schools and universities. I intend to compare and contextualise the reception of the two books in order to examine some of the current discursive practices of literary criticism. The argument that follows rests on two convictions: that literature has ethical effects; and that those who teach it exert influence and have a consequent responsibility.

But first, to the books. *The Hand that Signed the Paper* has sold approximately 45,000 copies; *The Monkey's Mask* has sold about 10,000. Considering that the latter is poetry and that the former had the promotional stimulus of a literary scandal, these figures can be seen to reflect a similar degree of success in the market. Both books have been widely reviewed, and most of the early reviews were favourable. Both have won prizes. Any impression of roughly equivalent critical esteem depends, however, on an implicit judgement of equivalent value. Since I place *The Monkey's Mask* in the category of Literature and *The Hand that Signed the Paper* in an unsavoury location somewhere between pulp fiction and propaganda, I find the recognition accorded them wildly disproportionate.

After an initial period of glowing reviews, Porter's book was the subject of a highly charged ethical critique by Finola Moorhead. Moorhead argued that *The*

*Monkey's Mask* absconds from the detective genre's 'basic decency, [its] respect for fact and logic' (Moorhead 179). However, her denunciation of the book is based on a reading in which the characters come all too completely to life; about Mickey, the central victim, she writes, 'This girl is a real poet and would have developed, had she not been murdered, into a worthwhile writer' (Moorhead 183). I'm not sure whether Moorhead has failed to notice that Porter is the author of Mickey's adolescent verse or whether she prefers not to think about the implications of her own response to it. In either case, the potential ethical charge of her position is undermined by what Kathleen Fallon rightly calls 'her breathtakingly literal and moralist reading' (Fallon 191).

One of the striking features of last year's debate about *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was that much of the literary criticism came from people whose primary area of expertise was politics or history or philosophy rather than literature. With a few exceptions, people associated with university English Departments either supported the book or were silent. Most of those who did make oppositional statements concentrated on extra-literary matters. If award judges, regular reviewers and English Department academics comprise the 'literary establishment' then the overall tendency of the literary establishment was acceptance and approval.

Many critiques of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* emphasise the need to remember the Holocaust; recent Internet material makes it clear that this is not mere paranoia. The following extracts are from the web page of an organisation called the Adelaide Institute:

> We are not 'holocaust deniers'. We proudly proclaim that to date there is no evidence that millions of people were killed in homicidal gas chambers. That is good news all round. Why would anyone find this offensive? ... Adelaide Institute associate, Mr David Brockschmidt, sums up the essence of Demidenko's 'crime' in writing this book: 'The merit of Helen Demidenko-Darville's novel — and hidden agenda of the anti-Demidenko affair — is that she has revealed a basic historical fact, viz, that Lenin's henchman, Trotzky (Bronstein) and Stalin's henchman, Kaganovich, were Jewish mass murderers...'

I suggest that *The Monkey's Mask* takes good and evil seriously and that *The Hand that Signed the Paper* doesn't. The best evidence for this claim comes from a study of characterisation in the two books. The relevance of characterisation to the ethical impact of fiction is convincingly argued by Frank Palmer in *Literature and Moral Understanding*.

Palmer contends that acquaintance with fictional characters, which he suggests is partly analogous to acquaintance with people, is one of the ways in which moral understanding can develop through the reading of fiction. In her review of Palmer's book, Suzanne Stern-Gillet summarises his proposition as follows:

> Barring interactive reactions, the whole gamut of attitudes and emotions that we display towards real-life persons are equally appropriate to fictional ones. Thus readers can, and should, in the process of coming to understand poems and novels, come to admire, dislike, be irritated, intrigued, or inspired by, agree or disagree with, fictional characters and the world-views they variously express, criticize or embody (Stern-Gillet 406-7).

If we accept that moral growth occurs and that it can develop through our response to and understanding of other people, then it does seem probable that it can happen through our reading of fiction as well.

To what extent do the characters in *The Monkey's Mask* and *The Hand that Signed the Paper* move us and remain in our memories? I am handicapped here by the fact that I am more familiar with *The Monkey's Mask*: *I* am sure that even on first reading Porter's villains, Nick and Diana, gave me more cause for reflection and took up a more permanent residence in my mind than any of the not-really-villains of *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, and that Jill's love for Diana caused me more unease than anything felt by the savage Ukrainians or cruel Jews of Demidenko's novel, but *you* might not be convinced. So I will just ask those of you who have read the book, how well do you know Vitaly, Evheny or Kateryna, Magda or Fiona?[1]

Although I object to many of Palmer's views, I agree with him in finding authors where others find only the play of textuality:

> To engage with the work is to engage with the mind that has produced it. It is not to contemplate a physical object shorn of moral significance, but to engage with the moral perspective, not lying behind the work but revealed *in* it. Of the work, and at the same time of the author, we can ask: why are we being shown this act of cruelty, this man's hopeless fate, this callousness, or this apparent triumph of evil over good?
> Since the author has selected certain events for our attention and has stipulated that this or that shall happen, our understanding of these events is at the same time an understanding of the attitudes of the author towards his material. In rejecting those theories that drop out the author we are not committed to the belief that we need an access to the author's state of mind that is independent of the work (though in *some* cases this might increase our appreciation or understanding) (Palmer 171; emphasis in original).

Or, in Finola Moorhead's terms:

> Every writer is responsible for the incidents in her fiction. Things don't happen of their own accord in invented work. They happen because the writer wants them to and the meaning of their presence is related to the underlying theme; the raison d'etre of the thing (Moorhead 179).

Here, Moorhead's words resonate fully with my understanding of reading, despite my objections to her simplistic application of the principle in her review of *The*

*Monkey's Mask*.

And is there any evidence of intention, any sign of an external *raison d'etre*, in the writer's public, extra-textual statements? Porter said that she would offend lesbians and Demidenko said that she would offend Jews.[2] And so it came to pass: Finola Moorhead was offended by *The Monkey's Mask* (as was the support group she acknowledges in her review, I presume); and many Jews were offended by *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. Can such agreement between writers who expect to give offence and readers who take offence be ignored? I want to emphasise that it is not the nature or degree of offence that I am interested in at this point. It is more important to consider whether we want to go on disregarding the agency of writers.

The books I'm talking about — and it seems much too obvious to need saying — were written by two actual women, women who have opinions and attitudes, feelings and prejudices like everyone else. I prefer to talk about the books and to refrain from speculation about the authors' personalities or motives, but I must insist — *pace* Barthes, *pace* Wimsatt and Beardsley — that in these cases at least, what the authors intended matters.

One of the problems involved in raising questions of ethical and aesthetic value is, for me, a reluctance to identify with positions already taken: shall I be a grumpy old curmudgeon or a naive humanist, an uneasily serious postmodernist or a devil-may-care post-everything cynic? Which leads me to a well known conversation.

> 'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.'
> 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'
> 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master — that's all.'
> (*Through the Looking Glass*, 274)

Which *is* to be master? That is the central question. Should we deify language, surrendering to its power to create us, or should we retain *some* conscious mastery, *some* power to create it? If we choose the former, then the recognition given to *The Hand that Signed the Paper* is appropriate, because we are indeed helpless against phrases like 'Jewish Bolsheviks'; but if we choose the latter, we are obliged to resist cliche and falsehood and plagiarism. If we choose to be master, we will bestow honours on the writers who create language, who *make* a word mean just what they choose it to mean. This is what Porter does in *The Monkey's Mask*, whereas the language of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* has a dull edge, capable only of wounding. This is where ethics and aesthetics meet: language mastered, language *made*, gives *new experiences* of feeling and new opportunities for moral understanding.

I return now to my earlier question: why was the flat, banal prose of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* more acclaimed than the fierce poetry of *The Monkey's*

*Mask*? Saussure's cut between sign and referent, and Derrida's more radical cut between signifier and signified, have been adopted during the last three decades in a way that disallows the assumption of meaning. Yet we know that words continue to mean and refer; all ordinary experience of communication confirms it. The slipperiness of language has been overstated; or perhaps one of its attributes, its capacity for failing to refer precisely at all times, has been taken to be its essence. An effect of that overstatement or that taking of attribute for essence was demonstrated in the recent Alan Sokal hoax, a logical outcome of the greater hoax of complete non-referentiality.

Since we all see through that greater hoax for the purposes of everyday communication — and imagine the absurd interrogations we would have to perform endlessly if we didn't — why are we fooled by it when we talk about literature? This is where the paradoxical alliances of support for *The Hand that Signed the Paper* begin to be explicable. Anyone trained in the reading techniques of this century knows that language doesn't always mean what it says, and many of those readers seem to have forgotten that sometimes it does. This is the best explanation I can find for the laudatory agreement between humanist and post-structuralist readers of *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, because I find it hard to imagine that they failed to notice that Jews were represented in it as the evil cause of their own fate or that the book's Ukrainians were caricatures. It also accounts for Jill Kitson's ability to convert 'searing truth' into 'even greater imaginative power' after the author's fake identity was blown. The reception of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* suggests that we need to start looking at the congruities between these seemingly opposed reading practices.

If language is arbitrary, as Saussure asserts and as it seems indeed to be, how does it operate in everyday life? If, when you talk about the colour 'red', I can have no certainty that what you perceive and describe is what I perceive and describe when I talk about it, how do we both follow the rules at traffic lights? If what we're saying by saying 'red' is (in effect, and in that particular circumstance) 'the colour that means we should stop' then does it matter whether our perceptions differ radically? In other words, doesn't the arbitrariness of language guarantee its referentiality?

For critics whose allegiances are with post-structuralism, lack of reference and lack of moral posture (or posturing) were virtues of *The Hand That Signed the Paper*; for humanists the opposite was true. The book's supporters seem to create the author in their own image: the next step after the death of the author being deification, of course.

It is easy, now, to say that caution and attention to motive would have been salutary in the Demidenko affair, but I am not here to allocate blame, at least not for the initial errors of judgement. I read the book after critiques of it had been published; who knows what I would have made of its racism and falsification of history if I hadn't been alerted to them beforehand?

There is one thing I am confident about, however: I would have thought that the book was very badly written. And that remains for me the most baffling and

under-scrutinised aspect of the whole affair. How could so many presumably competent readers accept, praise, and award prizes to something that has all the style of trash journalism.

I am indebted to Kerryn Goldsworthy for the following narratological analysis. She pointed out that shifts in narrative point-of-view occur not only between sentences but even within them in *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, demonstrating its lack of narrative control. Two short passages will serve as illustration:

> They marched into town, singing all the time. They sang 'Lili Marlene' with alternative lyrics. The lyrics were not nice. They were about having sex with dead women's bodies (110).

The first sentence seems to be in the voice of an omniscient narrator, although 'all the time' has a slightly faux-naif flavour reminiscent of 'the simple peasant'. The speaker of 'They sang 'Lili Marlene' with alternative lyrics' is clearly the omniscient narrator; 'simple peasants' don't use words like 'alternative' or 'lyrics'. In the next sentence 'lyrics' continues the narrator's voice while 'not nice' belongs to the 'simple peasant' dialect. And 'having sex with dead women's bodies' is the peasant voice — an omniscient narrator would call it necrophilia. The shock, the 'searing truth' of such writing results from narrative incoherence; each reader is forced to project a meaning on to it. This is not multivocalism; it is authorial incompetence.

> They grimace with hate. One of them yells 'Bolshie!' and lunges at her. She is raped, and left partly clad on the road shoulder, alive. The massacre is terrible, terrible. But in the boozy haze of the morning, no one notices (48).

Likewise, in this passage, when 'no-one notices' in 'the boozy haze of the morning', the exclusion of the victim from the category of those capable of noticing results from unconsciousness — at best — rather than skill.

As a result of the success of critiques of referentiality, academic literary studies can no longer call on notions of truth or authenticity to validate literary judgement. In an article in *The Australian*, John Tranter proudly recalled his laughter at the 'middle-class illusion ... of authenticity' during Jill Kitson's speech at the 1994 Miles Franklin Award presentation (Jost, Totaro & Tyshing 235) and at a Melbourne University seminar on the Demidenko affair Ken Ruthven reiterated, however ironically, the claim that 'there is nothing outside the text' against charges that the book was historically and morally untruthful.

The critical reception of *The Hand That Signed the Paper* initially fascinated me because it seemed that a very poor book was being praised to wild excess. *The Monkey's Mask* seemed a very brilliant book yet it received less acclaim. They were published in the same year and both met with some criticism on ethical grounds. As soon as I read *The Hand that Signed the Paper* I was sure that

aesthetically they were in different leagues and I have become convinced that the same can be said of their ethics. Critiques of *The Monkey's Mask*'s ethics appear to be based on misreading, as does the ethically based praise for *The Hand that Signed the Paper*.

A wide consensus of high praise for bad writing and mild praise for good writing is indicative of serious problems in critical practice. I have identified two groups of ideas as suspected causes: in shorthand they can be referred to as non-referentiality and the death of the author. I do not suggest that these notions, in their original forms, necessitated a breakdown in critical capacity; nor do I believe that they are generally taken as gospel. What I suspect is that in their wide influence they have come to operate as modes of censorship in the literary academy. Non-referentiality and non-intentionality disallow aesthetic criticism, in a sense: they cause a drift away from the close reading on which aesthetic criticism is based, and the aesthetic becomes a kind of no-go area. Ethical criticism based on misreading, or at least on the excessive freedom of interpretation allowed by non-referentiality, fills up the space and becomes the dominant form.

A wider and more speculative claim would be that the left's espousal of non-referentiality has undermined its capacity for social criticism and contributed to the international shift to the right. The Australian literary academy's failure to withhold legitimacy from a badly written piece of right-wing propaganda could be seen as a symptom of that process.

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## Endnotes

1. Robert Manne discusses the absence of 'recognisably human characters' in *The Culture of Forgetting*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1996, 130-132.

2. Porter: 'A lot of lesbians are not going to be very happy with me at all', in Jenny Digby, *A Woman's Voice*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1996, 13.
   Demidenko: 'The reviews were lovely. I've only had a couple of bad ones and those were in magazines with a readership of three and a bit, or in papers where I expected bad reviews, like the Melbourne *Jewish News*' in 'Writing After Winning', *Southerly*, 55(3), Spring 1995, 159.